

VOICES  
I Samuel 3:1-10  
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Faith is a combination of ideas about God and the mystical voices we have heard. Religion begins when we hear a voice summoning us to some kingdom other than this one.

It is Martin Luther King moving from the safety of an academic life to a bus boycott in Birmingham.

It is Albert Schweitzer leaving behind the beauty and accomplishment of music to be a physician in Africa.

It is ordinary people you know who leave hearthside and TV one night a week to tutor, or stand with, or listen to sisters and brothers who need them at Open Church.

It is Jesus, hearing a voice, leaving the stability of a family carpenter shop in Nazareth and ending up waist deep in the Jordan River.

Faith is a combination of ideas about God and the mystical voices. It is an elderly couple, Elkanah and Hannah, who to their great surprise and joy have a baby. They don't talk about it much, but they've heard a voice, and as is the case with people who have been married a long time and don't always need to say what they are thinking, Elkanah and Hannah don't talk about the voices they hear but they do take their son to the priest Eli, who presides over the sanctuary in Shiloh, and they give their son over to Eli's custodianship as an act of profound gratitude and religious commitment. It is there that young Samuel hears the voice.

What a wonderful old story this is. The voice comes in the night. Samuel thinks it is Eli calling, wakens Eli and asks what he wants. Eli concludes Samuel is dreaming and sends him back to bed. Three times it happens. Eli doesn't think it's a real voice! What I love most about this story is that old Eli acts like most of us would act under the circumstance. Finally, more out of desire to get some sleep than profound religious conviction, Eli tells Samuel to listen. "If the voice comes again, listen to it." And what came of that listening was Israel's first prophet, one of the pivotal figures in our family tree... "Listen," old Eli advised.

It seems that from the beginning of recorded history when people have listened to the world they have heard a voice. One of the major theological assertions in the Old Testament is that if you listen to the creation, what you will hear is the voice of the creator. "The heavens are telling the glory of God," the psalmist said. They are. So is the earth. So is the complex and magnificent evolutionary story of life. To listen to it is to hear the voice of the creator. "The voice of the Lord is upon the waters," that's a provocative favorite of sailors and beach people and of all who love the ocean and who return to it annually with the commitment of religious pilgrims.

At the ocean each morning the sound of the water wakens and beckons. Knowing it is there, nevertheless we look, checking to be sure, and in earliest light walk out to greet it as if in answer to a voice.

The psalmist was right, of course. "The voice of the Lord is upon the waters."

If you listen to the creation, the voice you hear will be the voice of the creator. There's nothing exclusively Judeo or Christian about that assertion. It is shared by many religions. C. S. Lewis wrote a little volume on the Psalms in which he observed:

"...the doctrine of creation leaves nature full of...the presence of God... The light is his garment, the thunder...his voice, the eruption of a volcano ...in answer to his touch...All this is clearly close to paganism. Thor and Zeus also spoke in the thunder." (Reflections on the Psalms, p. 70).

The theologians have always argued the issue of how much of God we can know through nature. "All you need to know," some have said, quoting the Psalms. "Nothing," others have said, suggesting that a person just victimized by a tornado would not have adequate nor accurate knowledge of God. St. Paul first suggested the Christian contribution to the discussion. Paul thought that a kind of knowledge of God was available to all people through nature, but not complete knowledge or "saving knowledge." That comes in Jesus Christ. What Christianity maintains is that the voice of the Lord is on the water...God does speak through creation. But when God is done creating the talking doesn't stop. There is more to be said than gets said in thunder, beautiful sunsets, and quiet early morning at the ocean. But faith can and does begin when we listen to creation.

Listen to the voice, Eli advised Samuel. It's amazing what we might hear if we listened - to each other. We simply don't do that very well. We are inclined to be talking when we should be listening: talking, often times, not with but past one another. Instead of listening to another, we are inclined to use the time while she or he is talking to organize and compose our response. In the close relationships which characterize life for most of us, listening is a creative, life-giving skill. In intimate relationships listening to the other is a powerful and affirming dynamic which says more eloquently than any gesture that we care and love and desire each other. Yet on rare occasions when another opens and tells us a deep hurt or profound joy or private dream, we are inclined not to listen, accept, share so much as trot out our deeper hurt or more profound joy and place it on the table. Instead of listening, we play verbal one upmanship. Our ritualized exercise in social intercourse, the cocktail party, becomes an arena in which we hone our skills in shouting sequences of banalities at each other. In retrospect, I've concluded that my graduate school invested one entire core sequence of academic and clinical courses to teach us four words - "Shut up and listen." Physicians keep telling us that the largest single demand and the most difficult for them to meet, is the need of people for someone to listen.

Listen to the voice, Eli advised Samuel. As we approach the anniversary of the Supreme Court decision this week, guaranteeing every woman's right of choice in the matter of abortion, it would be enormously helpful if people started to listen to each other. Eric Hoffer once noted that "to know a person's religion we need not listen to his profession of faith but must find his brand of intolerance." (see Martin Marty, Context, 1/15/85, p. 6). That is too frequently true. The people who are perpetrating a reign of terror in more than thirty bombings of women's

reproduction clinics around the country are often answering what they think they hear the voice of God - or the voice of conscience dictating. "I did it as a present to Jesus on his birthday," an earnest and arrested young woman said. My hope and prayer is that we will listen to each other about this issue and learn to love and respect each other even as we are coming to different conclusions. You are not listening - you are not respecting - if my position is simply obliterated in a torrent of subjective opinion and religious dogma expressed as the truth of God. We must learn to listen to each other.

The trouble with basing your life on mystical voices is that you may be the only one who hears them. The pragmatic problem which remains is this, how do you evaluate the voices? How do you discriminate between what is the voice of God, or the voice of the culture, or your own super-ego, or your parents? What do we do when someone claims to have heard a voice ordering her to blow up a clinic as a birthday present for Jesus? In the first scene of G. B. Shaw's play, St. Joan, she says:

"I hear voices telling me what to do. They come from God."

A military official scoffs: "They come from your imagination."

Joan responds: "Of course. That is how messages from God come to us."

The standard by which the voices are measured in Christian faith is the one event in which we believe God's voice may be heard most clearly and most eloquently. Jesus Christ is the word of God. What the scholars call "the Christ event" is the voice of God, God saying what he wants to be heard by the whole human race.

When Jesus was baptized, the voice said "This is my son. Listen to him." And ever after being a Christian has meant listening to that word, and measuring all the other voices we hear by this singular, clear voice of God. And so when the voices tell us to bomb a clinic - they need to be corrected by this voice. Or when our voices tell us that it's all right to hate, or that love isn't worth the effort, or that things will never get any better for the world or for us personally so why keep fighting, those voices need to be corrected by this singular, strong, and eloquent word from God.

The faith is not altogether subjective. We need to learn the spiritual discipline of listening, but what makes us Christians is the voluntary submission of the voices we hear to the judgment of Jesus the Christ.

"Listen to the voice," Eli advised Samuel. People of deep spirituality have known that a good portion of faithfulness is listening as a religious discipline. Saying prayers, for instance, is universally regarded as a minimal spiritual discipline: grace before meals, prayers before sleep. Some pray stylistically, some pray on the run, some - maybe most - pray little or not at all, not always because of a lack of faith, but sometimes because of a sense that this rote verbalization, this hurling pious phrases at God does not seem to have meaning. But what if praying were at least fifty percent listening? What if we listened instead of talked - as grace before meals. The mystics have always known that secret.

New interest in meditation techniques have begun to teach us a lesson that Western Christianity forgot centuries ago in its love affair with words, and that is you have to learn to listen if you want to hear the voice of God.

G. B. Shaw's play about the life of Joan of Arc is, at least in part, about the validity of personal religious experience. Joan, of course, hears voices. In the next to last scene she is being questioned by the Archbishop and by King Charles. The Archbishop asks: "How do you know you are right?" Joan answers: "I always know...my voices." King Charles interrupts her: "Oh, your voices. Your voices. Why don't the voices come to me. I am king, not you." Joan responds: "They do come to you but you do not hear them. You have not sat in the field in the evening listening for them. When the Angelus rings you cross yourself and have done with it; but if you prayed from the heart and listened to the thrilling of the bells in the air after they have stopped ringing, you would hear the voices as well as I do."

What if you listen and hear nothing? Some may have vivid experiences of God and hear actual voices and see actual visions. But what if you listen and what you hear is the clock ticking in the silence, nothing more.

What most of us hear when we listen for God is, at least, the sound of our own voice asking the question. At a meeting of the Presbytery last week a young woman from Bethany Presbyterian Church was taken under care, the first step in her ordination. In her personal statement of faith she caught my attention with this confession. "There have been no voices calling my name," she said, "but there have been plenty of sleepless nights." That's true for most of us. What we hear is the silence, the sound of our own questions.

And for the most of us - the word is, "keep listening, not only in the silences, but in the other places where Christ went. The word for the most of us, I think, is - keep listening in your praying, but listen as well in the world, particularly where you sense Jesus Christ would be, where hurts are healed, and lives renewed, where injustice is corrected and captives are set free. Listen for the voice of God where love reconciles and breaks down walls between people, where faithfulness and compassion and deep caring and strong joy are affirmed and lived and celebrated. Listen particularly where you are feeling impatient, where you are sensing the need to grow and become. Listen particularly where you are summoned to live in a kingdom other than the one in which you now live. Listen...

Now to the ruler of all worlds, undying, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.